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Linguistic landscape as a way to construct multiple identities in the context of globalization: the case of an ancient town in China

Tianyang Zhang

School of Humanities, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Shanghai, People's Republic of China

ABSTRACT

This article explores the linguistic landscape (LL) of Wuzhen, an ancient town with a history of more than 2,000 years and became the permanent venue for the World Internet Conference in 2014. The LL of Wuzhen is influenced by various factors, including globalization, urbanization, the tourism industry, heritage conservation, and government planning. In light of this, the study has made several field investigations into Wuzhen, examining the LL of four different areas and capturing 1602 photos of signs. Simultaneously, semi-structured interviews are conducted with residents to discuss their perceptions of the local LL and identity. The findings indicate that Wuzhen reshapes its local public space through various semiotic practices, constructing multiple identities that integrate traditionality, modernity, and internationality. It has also been found that LL should be regarded as a crucial semiotic resource anchored in sociocultural and historical space, whose mobility in the context of globalization and urbanization provides more possibilities for identity construction and reconstruction in peripheral regions.

Introduction

Since the concept of linguistic landscape (LL) was explicitly proposed (Landry and Bourhis 1997), its definition, scope, theories, and methods have been widely discussed. After more than twenty years of development, LL has become a significant research field in sociolinguistics, which can be understood as "a temporally and spatially dynamic fusion of text, materiality, and discourse" (Kallen 2023, 247).

In the last decade or so, LL research in China has been developing rapidly, and a considerable number of the research focuses on typical cities such as Beijing (e.g. Nie 2016; Xu 2018; Yu et al. 2016), Shanghai (e.g. Cockain 2018; Yu et al. 2019; Zhao and Lou 2023), Guangzhou (e.g. Han and Wu 2020; Liao and Chan 2024; Wu and Zhan 2017). These studies depict the multilingual ecologies of some urban regions, particularly expatriate enclaves, and scrutinize the status of language services and language governance in

major international cities. In recent years, LL research in China's ethnic minority regions has also gained increasing attention, and the research sites include the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture (Walters 2023; Yao et al. 2023), Kashgar (Yao et al. 2023), Shangri-La (Nie et al. 2023), Lhasa (Li 2020). Research topics include the inheritance of ethnic languages and cultures, identity recognition, language commodification, and language security. These studies reveal the disparity between policy expectations and actual implementation and uncover the disadvantaged position of minority languages under various circumstances, thereby providing valuable insights for formulating language policies at both national and local levels.

However, there still needs to be more discussion regarding the LL of towns in the urban peripheral regions. With the advancement of globalization and modernization, traditional towns on the urban periphery often face economic, social, and cultural challenges. Changes in land use may lead to profound alterations in local environments and social structures, while accelerated population mobility can result in economic instability. Moreover, modernization ideals and differing values can further contribute to the dissolution of existing local social relationships and the blurring of identity. These peripheral regions are relatively passive compared to cities in globalization. Although they share certain homogeneity in ethnicity, culture, and language due to their geographical proximity, they often face more contradictions in their development. The LL, as a prism of local spatial structures and social development (Lu and Chen 2023), can help us observe the various contradictions traditional rural towns face in the context of globalization.

Given this background, this study explores the LL of Wuzhen, an ancient town in the eastern coastal region of China. According to historical records, Wuzhen has a history of over 1300 years and is a typical ancient town in east China. While protectively developing local tourism resources and maintaining the original local characteristics, Wuzhen has vigorously developed the digital economy and Internet industry and has become the permanent venue for the World Internet Conference (WIC) in 2014. In this process, the LL of Wuzhen represents the construction of local identity. This study investigates four different areas of Wuzhen, including two scenic spots, an international conference center, and a local community, and interviews 14 residents, primarily analyzing the following issues:

(1) How do the LL units in Wuzhen's public space participate in multiple identity construction as a medium?
(2) How do the LL units reflect potential conflicts regarding social change, economic development, and heritage preservation in the context of globalization?

Theoretical framework

The production of space and place semiotics

Over the past two decades, LL research has increasingly become an interdisciplinary field. The object of LL research can be viewed as dynamic and evolving, subject to continual redefinition through discursive and social practices within the contexts of globalization, superdiversity, and transnationalism (Calvi and Bona 2020). This shift in analytical perspective has led to space being further viewed as "a human-social and psychological-activity" (Kallen 2023, 80). In this regard, Lefebvre (1991) made a well-known proposition that "(Social) space is a (social)

product" and "the space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action." The process of the production of space can be divided into three interrelated formats: "spatial practice," "representations of space," and "spaces of representation." This perspective regards space as a product of political and economic ideologies governed by a set of norms, thus making space a social construction. In other words, space embodies societal expectations of the behavior of actors derived from long-standing historical experiences and social practices. People understand and follow these expectations to behave normally. As Blommaert (2013, 32) argued, "There are expectations – normative expectations – about relationships between signs and particular spaces." The LL is highly correlated with space as a social construct. Among the theories related to the LL research, place semiotics, as an aspect of the geosemiotics framework, focuses on the historical convergence of people, place, discourses, ideas, and objects in a particular moment from the four elements: code preference, inscription, emplacement, and discourses in time and space (Scollon and Scollon 2003), which further builds up a system for the analysis of LL, and expands the definition of space to a more diversified social context (Shohamy 2019).

Place semiotics establish an intrinsic connection between the production of space and semiotic practice, which is mainly manifested in the following points. Firstly, within the scope of place semiotics, the LL, as a form of discursive semiotic practice, shapes public space characterized by language competition, institutional maintenance, power negotiation, and identity construction. Secondly, the creation and renewal of various signs correspond to the process of production and reproduction of space, leading to a long-term dynamic construction of space. Thirdly, space serves as both a repository for language and other semiotic resources and a significant backdrop for interpreting LL. By indexing the material world and interacting with space, LL imbues spaces with specific "meanings," thereby constructing locality and identity upon this foundation.

In general, the theory of the production of space, from a perspective of "triadic dialectics" (Schmid and Yang 2021), provides an epistemological foundation for understanding the process of spatial construction from different levels. Lefebvre (1991) regards material-social practices as the starting point of the production of space, while knowledge, language, and texts serve as intermediate links in the process. As Drucker (2010) suggests, "spaces are written, made, through acts of linguistic enunciation. Space does not preexist, a priori, and get filled with things. The signs help model its symbolic and lived reality", the LL, as a material carrier of language and written texts, is itself a form of material-semiotic practice, and therefore a visualizing medium for the analysis of the production of space. In addition, understanding LL as "historical trajectories of people, places, discourse, ideas, and objects come together" (Pennycook 2017) helps to explain the specific processes and ways in which symbolic resources, including language, interact with public space and co-produce meaning. In this process, the production and reproduction of space are represented by the contextualization and recontextualization of LL in the material world. In summary, the semiotic analytical framework of LL has internal logical consistency with the theory of the production of space.

Space, LL, and identity construction

Introducing the theory of the production of space into the analytical framework of LL also helps to shed further light on the construction of identities in specific spaces. In the

category of philosophy, "identity" typically refers to the "recognition of a thing as different from all other things, and including in its unity all its inner changes and other diversities" (Baldwin 1998, 504). It contains an inherent sameness and a constant state of being, whose formation is inseparable from the shared emotions and values of the group to which he/she belongs (Tajfel and Turner 1986; Zhang and Lu 2016). For cultural studies, identity is "a cultural construction because the discursive resources that form the material for identity formation are cultural in character" (Barker 2004, 93). From this perspective, identity can be described as a discursive practice that connects internal emotions with external discourse. Studies on LL have also demonstrated that identity is not fixed but multiple, arising from specific historical and cultural contexts (Dong 2020; Hiramoto 2015; Rowlett and Go 2024; Yan 2019). It encompasses both self-perception and external categorizations imposed by others (An and Zhang 2022). There exists a dialectical relationship between LL and identity construction. On the one hand, as a form of social discursive practice, LL can construct hybrid identities through both top-down institutional dimension and bottom-up creation of complex arrangements of signs that negotiate space and spheres of influence and power between groups that constitute a particular social context (Blackwood, Lanza, and Woldemariam 2016; Calvi and Bona 2020; Ding, Kim, and Kang 2020; Jenjekwa and Barnes 2018). On the other hand, the LL is not only a mere linguistic symbol; as an interactive site of communicative behavior, it can become a symbol of cultural authenticity and local identity, reflecting the identity psychology of a particular social group towards a specific language and culture (Han and Wu 2020; Luk 2013; Yao et al. 2023), and conveying linguistic ideologies and emotional discourse of the individual as well as the society while expressing identity (Järlehed 2015; Moriarty 2014; Yang 2021; Yao et al. 2024).

At the level of specific regions or places, LL, as a form of social practice and a crucial public discourse component, serves as the media between sign creators and viewers. They resonate with culture and history, reflecting the construction of multiple identities that bear traces of local history, imprints of traditional culture, and characteristics of modernity and globalization (An and Zhang 2022; Yuan and Hou 2023). Internal tensions may also exist within these multiple identities (Tang 2020; Yan 2019). Moreover, at the level of social actors, we can also observe the impact of LL on identity perception and the construction of multiple identities. For example, Hiramoto (2015) points out that the tattoos of the Japanese immigrant community in Hawaii drawing on Japanese culture do not convey native Japanese values but simultaneously project being a part of the local Japanese culture and Japaneseness within localness. In most cases, identities are not stable and monolithic but dynamic and competitive. Multiple identities are not equal; they are layered and stratified in one's identity repertoire. Individuals construct identities from particular social practices and identity-building resources (Dong 2020). Related arguments are also supported by Yao, Yan and Liu (2023) study of online LL, in which he notes that participants in the online space draw upon a complex array of semiotic resources from spatial repertoires to constantly negotiate their self-presentation and manage the effects of context collapse. In a way, identities exist in the LL, while space is the site for symbol attachment and negotiation.

Based on the above discussion, this study combines place semiotics with the analysis of the production of space. We propose three dimensions in which space and signs are linked to better reveal the intrinsic connection between the production of space, LL,

and identity construction. The three dimensions are: "semiotic conceptual space," "semiotic representation space," and "semiotic practice space." Among them, "semiotic conceptual space" corresponds to "representations of space," dominated by the planner of space, embodies the will and interpretation of the space, and is manifested in the conception of multiple identities that are gradually materialized, which can be presented through multilingual LL. The "semiotic representation space" corresponds to "spaces of representation," associated with the symbolic dimension of space, which is the process of representation of the material signs in the space. It manifests in the indexing of LL to different historical backgrounds and sociolinguistic contexts and in representing multiple identities. The "semiotic practice space" corresponds to "spatial practice," which is the interaction network of people in daily life and production and the concrete scene of production and reproduction of space. It is the semiotic practice of the LL to construct multiple identities in social space, and it includes the semiotic practice of the residents and the residents' perception of space and identity.

Research setting: Wuzhen

Wuzhen, one of China's most famous ancient towns, belongs to Jiaxing City, Zhejiang Province. It is in the most economically developed region of eastern China, neighboring essential cities such as Shanghai, Hangzhou, and Suzhou. Wuzhen is chosen as the site of this study because it is typical of traditional ancient towns in China and distinctly different from other similar ancient towns. Therefore, the local LL can provide us with a unique perspective on observing the construction of multiple identities in the context of globalization.

Wuzhen's local records can be traced back to the Spring and Autumn Period. It was first named Wuzhen in the Tang Dynasty. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, it had already become an important commercial town, famous for its well-developed sericulture and commercial trade. In the 1980s, the township industries, mainly state-run, flourished, and the economic structure of Wuzhen underwent a significant change. In the early 1990s, with the reform of the economic system, the leading state-run enterprises in Wuzhen had difficulty adapting to the new economic situation, and many of them were restructured or closed down, resulting in many workers being laid off in Wuzhen. The labor force outflowed, and local economies were in shambles. It was not until 1999 that Wuzhen began to implement the protection of the ancient town and tourism development that the local economy had a new growth point and began to take on a new lease of life. In 2006, Wuzhen was included in the United Nations World Cultural Heritage Protection Tentative List; in 2010, Wuzhen became the first national AAAAA tourist attraction in Jiaxing City. Entering the twenty-first century, Wuzhen focuses on supporting the tertiary industry with tourism as the core, optimizing the industrial structure, and realizing the leapfrog development of the local economy. Since 2014, with Wuzhen becoming the permanent site of the World Internet Conference (WIC), the local community began to focus on building the Internet industry and the digital economy and moved forward towards building a "modernized Wuzhen of the World."

In this process, the changes in the LL in Wuzhen also visually reflect the changes in the local spatial structure and social development. Therefore, Wuzhen's practice in constructing multiple identities can also be observed through the study of the local LL.

Materials and methods

The study adopts a method that combines fieldwork, quantitative statistics, and interviews. Firstly, we did fieldwork in Wuzhen between November 2019 and February 2024. We selected two tourist areas, Xizha and Dongzha, the Internet International Convention Center-Wucun (IICC-Wucun), and a native community in Wuzhen, as four sampling areas of LL. The two tourist areas have preserved the traditional and local characteristics of Wuzhen to the greatest extent while simultaneously serving as the town's window to the world. As the primary zones for local tourism development, these two areas inevitably require a degree of internationalization and modernization in their facilities and services, which is appropriately reflected in LL. Consequently, the LL representation and its creation mechanisms in tourist areas hold significant value for further discussion. The IICC-Wucun is WIC's leading venue and permanent site, hosting other large-scale meetings and exhibitions. Nearby leisure and resort areas complement it. The convening of WIC has further enhanced Wuzhen's international recognition, and quantitative data of the LL in this area may help further elucidate the construction of Wuzhen's multiple identities. In addition, we selected a local community where most residents are native. Compared to the tourist areas and the international conference center, the sampling data from the local community can better reflect the characteristics of the LL in the living areas of Wuzhen. It also contrasts the other three sampling areas, examining how the development of international tourism impacts the LL of local communities and the identity perceptions of the residents.

The collection of LL samples was mainly carried out between 2 and 6 February 2024. We photographed and collected LL (including shop signs, street signs, directional signs, warning signs, notices, advertisements, posters, graffiti, etc.) in the four areas mentioned above. The specific photography sampling areas are as follows: the main thoroughfares marked on the tourist area maps of Xizha and Dongzha; the interior and exterior of the Internet International Convention Center and its adjacent leisure and resort areas; and the Wuzhen Ginkgo Community and its surrounding streets. Besides, during our fieldwork in the past few years, we photographed samples of local LL, some of which have been changed. These samples can be used as diachronic material for historical analysis, though they were not included in quantitative statistics. Regarding sample counting, each sign with a distinct boundary was treated as a unit of measurement, regardless of its size; the same sign on the same store or building was not counted repeatedly (Backhaus 2006). Accordingly, a total of 1602 valid samples were collected. We did not adopt the "top-down" and "bottom-up" dichotomy when categorizing the samples. On the one hand, the notion of "official" or "private" can rarely be established in an uncontested way (Coupland 2012), and this dichotomy sometimes "fails to capture the notion of agency and how it impacts language forms in the LL" (Huebner 2009). On the other hand, it is also due to the creation of LL in Wuzhen having certain particularities, which will be further explained in the subsequent discussion. Thus, based on the functional positioning of the LL, we divided the collected samples into four main categories: commercial signs, informational signs, publicity signs, and warning signs. The LL, which does not have the above functions, is categorized as another sign, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The number of collected samples.

	Xizha	Dongzha	IICC-W	Native community
Commercial signs	305	140	0	493
Informational signs	228	118	93	59
Warning signs	40	26	6	10
Publicity signs	7	10	3	15
Other signs	9	30	0	10
Total	589	324	102	587

In addition, we also conducted interviews with 14 residents living or working in Wuzhen between August 2022 and March 2024, with the length of the interviews ranging from 30 min to 2 h, all of which were audio-recorded with the interviewees' consent. We comprehensively considered background elements such as age, education, and occupation when selecting interviewees to cover as many social groups as possible. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, with real-time adjustments to the content and process. In terms of the language used in the interviews, we selectively used Mandarin or the local dialect according to the language preference of the interviewees since some residents, especially the acknowledged people, need to be more proficient in Mandarin or even have a negative attitude towards it. The interviews focused on the following issues: Firstly, the changes in the representation of the local LL and residents' perceptions of such changes; and secondly, residents' anchoring of local identity.

Findings

The findings section is divided into two parts. One part centered on the "semiotic conceptual space" dimension, discussing how the LL represents spatial dominators' conception of multiple identities. The term "spatial dominator" here refers to groups or institutions with dominant authority over the planning and use of space, such as the entities responsible for developing tourist areas. The other part revolves around the dimensions of "semiotic representation space" and "semiotic practice space," analyzing how the LL, as a material-discursive practice, participates in constructing multiple identities. Both parts will combine the categorical statistics of signs, individual sample analysis, and interview texts to present the connection between Wuzhen's LL and identity construction from different perspectives.

Table 2. Code combinations and distribution in different types of LL in Xizha.

	Commercial	Informational	Warning	Publicity	Other
Monolingual					
C	202 (66.2%)	23 (10.1%)	4 (10%)	4 (57.1%)	9 (100%)
E	7 (2.3%)	–	–	–	–
Bilingual					
C-E	91 (29.8%)	184 (80.7%)	36 (90%)	3 (42.9%)	–
E-C	3 (1.0%)	–	–	–	–
C-J	1 (0.3%)	–	–	–	–
Multilingual					
C-E-J	1 (0.3%)	9 (3.9%)	–	–	–
C-E-G-K-J	–	12 (5.3%)	–	–	–

Note: C: Chinese; E: English; J: Japanese; G: Germany; K: Korean. The order of the languages in the table indicates the order of their degree of prominence within the signs.

"Semiotic conceptual space": the conception of multiple identities

Tables 2 and 3 demonstrate the statistics of different categories of signs in Xizha and Dongzha. Among the informational signs, both Xizha and Dongzha are predominantly bilingual, with a higher percentage of bilingual signs in Xizha (80.7%) than in Dongzha (59.3%), and all the bilingual informational signs have Chinese as the dominant code, with no other codes other than Chinese and English appearing in the signs. The percentage of monolingual informational signs in Dongzha (22%) is twice as high as that in Xizha (10.1%), and only one sample is not in Chinese. Only two fixed-order code combination types (see Tables 2 and 3) appeared in the multilingual informational signs in two areas, with Chinese being the dominant code in both. Only two code combinations, Chinese monolingual and Chinese-English bilingual, appear in the warning signs in Xizha and Dongzha, and Chinese is the dominant code for all bilingual warning signs, accounting for 90% and 88.5%, respectively, which was significantly higher than that for Chinese monolingual warning signs (10% and 11.5% respectively).

Most informational and warning signs are typical of the "top-down" LL, in which the organization in charge of developing the tourist area dominates. The data shows that in the informational and warning signs of Xizha and Dongzha, the visibility rate of foreign language texts reaches 89.9% and 79.9%, respectively. As the initial attempt at heritage preservation and tourism development in Wuzhen, the Dongzha project began in 1999. A former staff involved in scenic development mentioned in the interview:

> … At that time (in 2001), hundreds of guests and their families attending the APEC Ministerial Meeting in Shanghai visited Dongzha twice in a row … That same year, Wuzhen was also included in the tentative list for World Cultural Heritage sites, marking a significant opportunity for Wuzhen to showcase itself to the world … [Mr. Xu, artist, 23rd August 2022]

During the field trip in Dongzha, we came across some wooden site orientation signs that were cracked and faded (see Figure 1). In response to the practical need for multilingual services, these early signs already featured English, German, Korean, and Japanese texts. Due to exposure to the sun, rain, and weathering, the signs appeared worn, and some of the texts were difficult to read. However, the management of the scenic area chose not to update or replace these signs, indicating that the dimension of tradition is an integral part of Wuzhen's semiotic conceptual space, which emphasizes the traditional imagery of the town. The multilingual features of these early signs also suggest that Wuzhen had begun to envision an international identity long ago. Despite the limitations imposed during the development and design process, as Dongzha did not complete the relocation of its

Table 3. Code combinations and distribution in different types of LL in Dongzha.

	Commercial	Informational	Warning	Publicity	Other
Monolingual					
C	123 (87.9%)	26 (22%)	3 (11.5%)	3 (30%)	28 (93.3%)
E	2 (1.4%)	1 (0.9%)	–	–	–
Bilingual					
C-E	15 (10.7%)	70 (59.3%)	23 (88.5%)	7 (70%)	2 (6.7%)
Multilingual					
C-E-J	–	1 (0.9%)	–	–	–
C-E-G-K-J	–	20 (16.9%)	–	–	–

Figure 1. Informational signs in Dongzha.

residents as part of the planning, the visibility rate of foreign language texts in this area's informational and warning samples is still close to 80%.

Compared to Dongzha, Xizha adopted a more explicit internationalization concept right from the initial stages of its design, and it pioneered a collective property development model. Before initiating the Xizha development project in 2003, the government and investors bought out all the property rights in Xizha, establishing a unified development entity for the scenic area. This approach allowed planners to enter the original residential community space as new spatial stakeholders, assuming dominators in space reproduction, driving alterations in spatial structure, and more comprehensively integrating the overall planning intentions and concepts into the entire scenic area space. Therefore, compared to Dongzha, Xizha's LL exhibits a more consistent overall style. Additionally, an interviewee mentioned:

Mr. Chen (Chen Xianghong, the CEO of Wuzhen Tourism Co., Ltd) had already anticipated the future trend of intelligent development when planning the entire scenic area. While many Chinese people were still unfamiliar with the concept of Wi-Fi, we had already implemented Wi-Fi coverage throughout the scenic area, leading to a more decadent array of intelligent application scenarios in the later stages … All of this reflects the inevitable demand for the future development of the tourism industry. [Mrs. Qiu, an executive of Wuzhen Tourism Co., Ltd, 21st August 2022]

Take a specific informational sign in Xizha as an example (see Figure 2). This wooden sign has a contour shape that imitates the appearance of local architecture, presenting a distinct traditional style, which contains information in five languages arranged from right to left as the traditional Chinese reading order, providing interpretable information for visitors from multiple countries. At the same time, the bottom of the sign provides a QR code with instructions for visitors to scan to obtain detailed information about the scenic spot.

Figure 2. Informational sign in Xizha.

Table 4. Code combinations and distribution in different types of LL in IICC-Wucun.

	Commercial	Informational	Warning	Publicity	Other
Monolingual					
C	–	13 (14%)	1 (167%)	1 (33.3%)	–
Bilingual					
C-E	–	78 (83.9%)	5 (83.3%)	2 (66.7%)	–
E-C	–	2 (2.2%)	–	–	–

After scanning the QR code using a smartphone, visitors can be redirected to pages containing information about the scenic spot and audio guide services. Through this modern digital media and internet means, the LL, confined initially to physical space, can rely on intertextuality to link tangible entities in the space with intangible information such as web pages, electronic texts, and audio, thereby expanding the interaction space between the LL and the behavioral subjects to a large extent. This also indicates that Wuzhen is no longer confined solely to the dimension of traditional identity but manifests an identity conception that simultaneously embodies traditional, modern, and international characteristics. Through the improvement of multilingual services in the scenic area and the expansion of intelligent applications, this multiple identity conception gradually materializes and is represented in the LL.

The LL of IICC-Wucun further exemplifies Wuzhen's multiple identity conception. Table 4 demonstrates that bilingual signs in Chinese and English account for the vast majority, with foreign language samples comprising 85.3% ($n = 87$) of the total samples in this area. On the one hand, it is because the conference center is primarily used for hosting various international conferences and large-scale exhibitions, differing in function and positioning from regular scenic areas. On the other hand, it is also because Wuzhen has long been exploring the paths of internationalization and modernization, leading to a more prominent multilingual feature and awareness of language services in this area compared to the former two. Wuzhen's being designated as the permanent venue for the World Internet Conference in 2014 reflects the initial realization of the identity conception.

"Semiotic representation space" and "semiotic practice space": the construction of multiple identities

Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate that the visibility of foreign languages on information and warning signs in Xizha and Dongzha is 89.9% and 79.9%, respectively. This suggests that to ensure foreign visitors can promptly access relevant information and reminders within the scenic area, both areas have achieved comprehensive coverage of foreign languages on their information and warning signs. Besides, Xizha was developed later than Dongzha, and the further increase in the visibility of foreign languages on signs also reflects Wuzhen's gradually improving awareness of multilingual services, reflecting the spatial practice of the LL on the dimension of Wuzhen's international identity.

Additionally, it can be found that in most bilingual and multilingual signs, Chinese text occupies an overwhelmingly dominant position, reflecting the continuity and unity of space dominator in terms of policy orientation and ideology. Meanwhile, English dominates information and warning signs over other foreign languages such as Japanese

and Korean. This is mainly due to the context of globalization. As an internationally universal language, English possesses more muscular mobility and indexicality in the semiotic practice within scenic spaces than other foreign languages. This indicates that in the context of globalization, the world of languages is not just of difference but of inequality; the status of a language depends on the mobility of its concrete semiotic resources (Blommaert 2010).

It can also be found from Tables 2 and 3 that the number of monolingual signs is much higher than that of bilingual and multilingual signs in both commercial categories. The Chinese monolingual signs accounted for the highest percentage, reaching 66.2% and 87.9% respectively. Among the commercial bilingual signs, Chinese-English is the primary type of code combination, and Chinese occupies a dominant position compared with English. There are only 2 cases of commercial signage containing other language in the two areas.

In most cases, commercial signs are subject to fewer restrictions. Therefore, they tend to enhance commercial competitiveness and maximize profitability through code preference, personalized design, and multimodal presentation. However, the LL representation in Wuzhen's scenic areas is quite different. Taking Xizha as an example, Table 2 indicates that the visibility rate of foreign languages in commercial signs (33.8%) is significantly lower than that in informational and warning signs (89.9%), directly related to the development and management model of the scenic area. As the dominant force in the production and reproduction of space, Wuzhen Tourism Co., Ltd has unified planning and design for the operating content, layout, and sign styles of all shops within the scenic area during the development process. To ensure the overall integrity and authenticity of the scenic area, most shop signs in the tourism area undergo unified restoration and production, using calligraphy fonts such as clerical script, regular script, running script, and cursive script, with traditional Chinese characters as the only text on the signs. Some signs even include seal script and oracle bone script, making Chinese monolingual signs (66.2%) the highest proportion in the LL samples of Xizha. This control exerted by space dominators over the production activities of other space users manifests as a unique semiotic order in the construction of multiple identities. Through the percentage of signs with different combinations of codes, we can also see the direct impact of this top-down semiotic practice constraint on semiotic representation space.

During the process of protective development, Wuzhen adheres to the concept of "repairing old items with old materials," utilizing various old stones, timbers, plaques, doors, windows, and furniture to renovate the original appearance and structure of houses in Wuzhen, as stated by an interviewee in charge of scenic area development:

> At that time, just the old plaques collected from all over the country filled three warehouses. For the plaques to be used on the old streets, Chen (Chen Xianghong) requested us to repair them according to ancient craftsmanship. For this purpose, we hired many stonemasons, carpenters, and lacquerers and, after completion, invited calligraphers to inscribe. In the process of plaque design, we consulted a lot of materials and ancient books because different shops have different style requirements, ensuring that each plaque has its cultural connotations. [Mr. Xu, artist, 23rd August 2022]

In the construction of local identity through semiotic practices, the fonts, material, layering, and state changes of LL are all significant semiotic resources (Scollon and Scollon

Figure 3. Inn plaque in Xizha.

2003). For instance, Figure 3 is a wooden inn plaque crafted using traditional techniques in Xizga. The inn is named "冶坊桥客栈" ("Ye Fang Qiao," Smelter Bridge Inn), with a black background and gold-colored font, both exhibiting noticeable natural fading. Additionally, there are symmetrically distributed hollow wood carvings around the sign. Concerning the font, the sign employs handwritten regular script calligraphy and traditional Chinese characters, indexing to traditional culture and classicism. Regarding material, the sign utilizes old timber, which is repaired and processed to maintain the authenticity of representation and cultural connotations of the scenic area to the greatest extent. Regarding text content, the name "冶坊桥" indicates its geographical location in physical space and reinforces the tourist image of a "riverside residence." Although the old smelter no longer exists, it creates a spatial association with the historical dimension. As a reproduction practice of space, this LL creation method also represents multiple cultural identity indexes. Remaking old plaques using ancient methods plays new informational and symbolic functions in the current social space, completing the reshaping of material discourse. This indicates that the reproduction practice of symbols in space is essentially a process of recontextualization of material culture. The materiality of LL allows them to be contextualized and re-contextualized, as it can index a specific historical and sociocultural context, enabling people to glean underlying information and value orientations from texts based on the particular contexts.

Figure 4 is a flagstone observed in Dongzha, engraved with the characters "广电" ("Guangdian," pipelines for communications). Besides enhancing the traditional representation of the scenic area, such flagstone roads also mark the underground infrastructure while indexing the associated history. Before tourism development, the town's residents had dug up all the flagstones on the old street to make it easier for vehicles to pass through. To this end, the restoration working group acquired 140,000 m^2 of old stone material for road restoration. In the restoration process, all the cables and pipelines

Figure 4. Texts on the flagstones in Dongzha.

were buried in the ground, maintaining the authenticity of the landscape and further improving the overall appearance of the region. This indicates that although LL is anchored in material space, it can transcend specific time and space constraints by indexing related historical backgrounds and sociolinguistic conditions, becoming a powerful practice and symbolic means of constructing locality. It is worth mentioning that the residents chose a "modernization" stance in this specific historical context. The direct motivation for digging up the flagstones was to adapt to the increasing number of local vehicles. Meanwhile, the workgroup tasked with protecting and developing the scenic area represents official intentions, standing on the side of maintaining "traditionality." Therefore, the actors in the process of production and reproduction of space are not in an absolute dominant or subordinate relationship, and their positions are not fixed. The history and reality indexed by LL often reflect a more complex and dynamic identity negotiation process.

In addition, the scenic area imposes strict restrictions on various postings on building surfaces, generally only allowing businesses to use minor wooden-framed signs as tools for shop promotion and supplementary information. Due to strict control over the use of lighting in the scenic area, there are relatively few status changes of the LL, presenting an aesthetic of "low semiotic intrusion" (Scollon and Scollon 2003), which is suitable for the tranquil atmosphere of the water town and brings a more original semiotic representation space for the tourists. The LL also maintains and represents the dimension of traditional

identity through the control and combination of internal semiotic resources such as fonts, material, layering, and status changes.

Although in the tourist areas and international conference centers of Wuzhen, the LL can be readily observed as a discourse practice, constructing multiple identities from both synchronic and diachronic dimensions, the representation of the LL in the native community exhibits significant differences. Table 5 indicates that the LL in this native community is significantly monolingual, with monolingual signs accounting for 87.1%. Regardless of the categories of signs, monolingual Chinese signs comprise over 80%. Most bilingual samples in this area prioritize Chinese as the dominant code (94.7%). There is only one case in which a code other than Chinese and English appeared in the samples in the region. Overall, the visibility of foreign languages in this area is as low as 14.5%, significantly lower than the visibility of Chinese (98.5%) in the LL of this area. Figure 5 shows the LL of a convenience store in the native community. The operator has placed as many informational signs as possible within the limited space of the storefront, covering not only the goods directly sold by the store, such as toys, office supplies, cigarettes, and non-staple foods, but also the services that the operator can provide, including real estate rentals and sales, and marriage brokerage. The operator may not necessarily possess professional qualifications and licenses to provide the relevant services, as they rely heavily on the operator's long-term experience living in the community, extensive interpersonal relationships, and sources of information. Therefore, these Chinese monolingual signs not only provide information on a practical level but also index the community space and individual life experiences.

It can be observed that the LL of the native community does not represent the construction of multiple identities, indicating that the integration into the globalization process is probably a relatively passive process for the residents. Therefore, it is necessary to further explore the primary motivations behind this construction of multiple identities by considering residents' perceptions of identity. Residents' perception of semiotic space and self-identity corresponds to the "perceived" space, thus also constituting an essential component of the semiotic practice space. When asked about their perception of the identity of being a "Wuzhen resident" during interviews, most respondents simultaneously mentioned two key words "tradition" and "international":

> The identity of being a 'Wuzhen resident' now sounds more like a fusion of traditional culture and internationalization. Wuzhen's ability to go global is inseparable from its traditional cultural characteristics; first and foremost, it is local, and only then can it have the foundation to go international. [Miss Hu, local student, 18th August 2022]

Table 5. Code combinations and distribution in different types of LL in native community.

	Commercial	Informational	Warning	Publicity	Other
Monolingual					
C	419 (85%)	50 (84.7%)	8 (80%)	15 (100%)	10 (100%)
E	9 (1.8%)	–	–	–	–
Bilingual					
C-E	60 (12.2%)	9 (15.3%)	2 (20%)	–	–
E-C	4 (0.8%)	–	–	–	–
C-J	1 (0.2%)	–	–	–	–

Figure 5. A convenience store in the native community.

In the interviewees' narratives, "traditionality" is the basis for the diverse identity construction in Wuzhen. Only by upholding locality and authenticity can Wuzhen become a representative of China to the world. Additionally, several interviewees noted that in the past two decades, Wuzhen has been committed to the preservation of the ancient town and cultural exploration, leading to an increasing number of residents recognizing the importance of cultural heritage:

> In the past, when there was no tourism, people commute to and from the factories daily. Who had the time to think about traditional culture? After tourism began, the government started emphasizing the protection of ancient buildings and cultural excavation. This has allowed ordinary people to understand their hometown better. [Mrs. Qian, local innkeeper, 17th August 2022]

This indicates that tourism in Wuzhen has brought development to the local area, enhancing the sense of local cultural identity among residents and promoting the exploration

and growth of local culture. The strengthening of this convergent national cultural psychology further influences identity formation, allowing it to be maintained at a high level and becoming the psychological foundation for multiple identity construction.

Several interviewees mentioned that the economic development brought by the tourism industry is a significant reason for enhancing residents' identity, and their attitudes towards being "Wuzhen people" are dynamic and evolving. In the late 1990s, Wuzhen was often referred to as a "dark and dilapidated town" due to economic recession, so the identity of being "Wuzhen people" was usually associated with the imagination of poverty. However, with the economic development and increased international reputation, most interviewees expressed pride in being "Wuzhen people" today. This is because the traditional dimension of this identity is appreciated and recognized and symbolizes modernity and internationality. This indicates that "Wuzhen people" are transitioning from a purely traditional semiotic identity to a multiple and mixed identity in the context of globalization.

Discussion

Based on the findings and analysis above, we posit that LL planning can be regarded as the spatial dominator's imaginative projection of local symbolic space and social identity. Within this conception of multiple identity construction, traditionality, modernity, and internationality emerge as the pivotal dimensions governing the modes of semiotic practices in the space of LL and influencing the overall formation of LL representations. The "semiotic practice space" essentially involves the process of contextualizing and recontextualizing semiotic resources, including LL. Based on the different dimensions of identity, the LL of Wuzhen indexes different sociolinguistic contexts and spatial and temporal backgrounds through corresponding semiotic practices, thus constructing the "semiotic representation space" capable of representing and sustaining this hybrid identity. In this process, residents' sense of identification with local identity and traditional culture continues to strengthen, manifested as a conscious awareness of the transformation and reconstruction of traditional identity at the level of perceived space.

However, the individual cases of LL in the study also indicate that the subjects involved in spatial production and reproduction processes are not static. Indexed by semiotic practices, the material world often presents more complex identity negotiation issues, revealing potential phased conflicts among social change, economic development, and heritage preservation. Even though Wuzhen's multiple identities have primarily taken shape, semiotic conceptualization and semiotic practice, as dynamic human social activities, will continue to keep the local space in a prolonged dynamic construction and reconstruction process.

Besides, contemporary tourism, as a global cultural industry, has dramatically influenced the LL representation of tourist destinations and exacerbates the tension among language, identity, culture, and socio-economic factors. Tourism provides opportunities for regions previously on the periphery of globalization to redistribute resources, transforming local language and cultural resources into various forms of LL, playing a central role in creating a sense of place (Yan 2019). This satisfies tourists' pursuit of exoticism and authentic experiences while also altering the original values of the locale, directly contributing to the construction of local identity.

Past research indicates that the profit-driven effects accompanying tourism development exacerbate the phenomenon of linguistic commodification (Xu and Ren 2015), prompting the LL of tourist destinations to transform semiotic resources into exchangeable commercial products and to achieve economic benefits through the invocation of stereotypical cultural schemas or the consumption of affective needs, accelerating the disintegration of local identities (Heller et al. 2014). However, in the case studies of this research, the commercial LL did not exhibit a phenomenon of spiraling out of control within the semiotic order; instead, it played a crucial role in upholding the construction of traditional identity, indicating that rational property development and management models can effectively mitigate the possible negative impacts of tourism development on local language and cultural resources. Since the LL is anchored in a specific social space, its production and reproduction are greatly influenced by dominators and the interactive order within the space. Therefore, by intervening in the process of production of space, one can guide semiotic resources to play a pre-determined role in the construction of local identities.

Overall, leveraging unique development concepts and operational models, Wuzhen maximally preserves the authenticity of local traditional charm, avoiding disorderly competition that commercial development may bring and continuously discovering and perpetuating local culture. Meanwhile, Wuzhen has been exploring an internationalization path suitable for itself from the outset of its development. With the establishment of modernization and internationalization strategic visions, and the recent penetration of the digital economy and internet industries in the area, Wuzhen has reshaped its local social public space through different semiotic practices and constructed multiple identities combining the characteristics of traditionality, modernity, and internationality. This study also suggests that even though identity crises have become a common phenomenon in the processes of globalization and urbanization (Yang 2010), the cultural, economic, and social values carried by discursive resources are continuously reshaped in mobility, providing more possibilities for the construction of hybrid identities in different locales.

Conclusion

This study explores the inherent relationship between the theories of the production of space and place semiotics, attempting to integrate the theory of space into the semiotic analysis framework of LL. This endeavor aids in explaining the principles of local identity construction from a micro-level perspective, presenting the interactive process among different discourse resources. Furthermore, by conducting statistical analysis on 1602 LL samples and combining them with specific sample analysis and interviews, this study explores the dialectical relationship between the LL of Wuzhen and its multiple identity construction. Lastly, this study provides a historical perspective beyond the synchronic level. This further supports our central viewpoint: LL should be regarded as a crucial semiotic resource anchored in sociocultural and historical space, serving as a spatial discourse reflecting and transforming spatial structures.

Disclosure statement

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